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**Stream 6, Human Resource Management  
Competitive Session**

**Out of the frying pan and into the fire - Forging a Career in a Temporary  
Workplace: A new perspective for HR?**

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## Stream 6, Human Resource Management

### Out of the frying pan and into the fire - Forging a Career in a Temporary Workplace: A new perspective for HR?

#### ABSTRACT

Recent literature acknowledges the need for new career development models to support the way that careers evolve in the 21st century workplace (Bloch 2005). This is particularly so within temporary organisation forms, and for those pursuing a career in project management (Hölzle 2010). Our research, explores how project managers working on projects and within temporary organisation forms and those working on project-linked contracts access the development opportunities they require to remain employable in an era of project-by-project employment. Set in Australia where a project-based economy (Crawford, French and Lloyd-Walker 2013) and contract work have led to casualisation of the workforce (Connell & Burgess, 2006; McKeown & Hanley (2009) the results suggest new approaches to career development may be required.

**Keywords:** Human resource development; training and development; job design

#### The Research Setting

The research is set in Australia, where the dominance of the mining and construction industries, when combined with IT, is indicative of a project-based economy (Crawford, French & Lloyd-Walker 2013). Indeed Australia has been identified as having a high rate of casualisation of the workforce and of contract workers (Connell & Burgess, 2006; McKeown and Hanley 2009). These employment forms bring into question the level of commitment to employee development and of capability development for the future (Connell & Burgess, 2006). This is particularly the case in project management (PM), for working on projects is, by nature, a temporary pursuit.

With project teams increasingly being used to deliver products and services and to bring about change, vital for organisational survival, the capabilities of those working on these projects are of great importance to organisations. The profile of the traditional project manager no longer describes many involved in project delivery. Because projects are used across an increasingly broad range of industries and workplaces people from an increasingly diverse range of professions and trades are becoming project team members and managers. Project managers now come from fields and backgrounds, for instance health program delivery, that have resulted in an increase in female project managers.

Our research explores the lived experience of project managers in Australia to identify whether they are being supported in pursuing their careers and, if so, which support has been most beneficial. Our

research aims to answer the question: Do organisations offer learning opportunities that support career development for all project managers? To answer this question we have explored the experience of employees and contract staff in gaining access to development to pursue a career in PM. Using a semi structured interview format, data was gathered from 73 participants, spread across engineering, construction, emergency management and IT/Business. Results will add to current career development theory as it relates to temporary organisations and will contribute to the development of career models in PM. In this paper we commence by describing changes that have taken place within organisations, then discuss the implications of these changes for the way in which people now work. Next we discuss careers within the new organisational forms and then describe our research design and results leading to our conclusions and recommendations.

### **New Organisational Structures**

The structure of organisations and the way in which work is performed within them has changed over recent years. Organisations as long-term entities came about as a result of industrialism (Lundin & Söderholm 1995) and organisation theory that has developed since has been based on the assumption of permanence of organisations. Yet when we look closely at the way that work is carried out in organisations today permanence of role, or even of employment, is not the reality. The pressures of globalisation, new technology, “increased rates of product, service and process innovation” (Hobbs, Aubry & Thuillier 2008, 547) and increased competition have led to organisations “developing new, more flexible organisational forms” (Hobbs, et al., 547). Indeed “hierarchical, functionally structured organisations of the past are being replaced by project-oriented and project-based organisations” (Bergman, Gunnarson & Räisänen, 2013, p. 106). Opinions vary as to whether the terms ‘project-based’ and ‘project-oriented’ organisations are interchangeable. In project-based organisations “the project is the primary unit for production organisation, innovation, and competition” (Hobday, 2000, p. 874). A project-oriented organisation is one where project teams are formed to achieve specific objectives: to implement a change program or to design a new product and introduce it onto the market. Here the project is not the primary unit of production, however its success is vital for effective organisation.

Projects are a significant characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup> century organisations (Huemann 2010). Gaddis's seminal work (1959) establishing the term 'project management', described a project manager as a male engineer working in heavy industrial and construction settings. More recently a range of authors have confirmed that projects are now commonly used across a broad range of industries and workplaces. Though still strongly linked to engineering and construction, projects are now viewed as a way of achieving organisational objectives and providing flexibility across a broad range of areas. Whitley (2006) stated that across industries there has been an increased use of project-based modes of organising economic activities. Others made similar arguments (Hyväri 2006; Söderlund & Bredin 2006; Cicmil & Hodson 2006). Hodgson (2005) highlighted that the sharp increase in the number of members of the PM profession has been linked to changing organisation forms. Indeed, projects have come to be viewed as organisations in themselves (van Donk & Molloy, 2008). Many people are now finding themselves pursuing a career in PM when that had not been their original career objective (Paton, Hodgson and Cicmil (2010). This way of structuring work is viewed by many as providing the adaptability and flexibility required in today's complex work environment, indeed Hobday (2000) found that using a PM approach supported flexibility and responsiveness. DeFillipi and Arthur (1998) termed this the project-based enterprise and drew attention to the film industry as being project-based.

For thousands of years people have worked on projects: construction of the pyramids (Packendorff 1995), building the Colosseum and increasingly in recent times within new business endeavours. Projects are temporary organisations. In their original theory of the temporary organisation, Lundin and Söderholm's (1995, p. 444) framework used "four concepts - time, task, team and transition" to describe or classify any organisation and to thereby decide the extent to which it was a permanent or temporary organisation. Their framework can be used to define an organisation as project-based or to describe the extent to which project teams are used within an organisation to carry out a range of tasks. Using Lundin and Söderholm's (1995) framework reveals that a broad range of organisations could be seen to use temporary configurations of staff to deliver core services. Those industries traditionally viewed as project-based are confirmed, but the reality that many more employees work in roles within temporary project teams is also revealed. For instance, a legal *team*, within a legal firm, may work for

a limited period of *time* addressing a brief from a client. The *task* of this legal team will be to accomplish the outcome the client desires, to *transition* from one state, or situation, for the client to another preferred state. The membership of the team will have been formed to ensure that the expertise required to address the client's needs is available. The people that make up the team will return to their usual roles when the outcome has been achieved.

Tyssen, Wald and Spieth (2014) described temporary organisations as taking the form of projects, programs, temporary teams, or task forces. Formerly confined to “industries such as construction, film-making, and software engineering” now as a result of projectification, temporary organisations extend into “almost every industry” (Tyssen, et al. 2013:366). But temporary organisations have also led to people being employed temporarily. A new group of workers has emerged, those who are employed for their expertise for the duration of the temporary organisation. Many project workers need to consider whether they will pursue a career as an employee or one of self employment, where contracting is considered a career in itself (Peel & Inkson 2004). This change in the way in which organisations are organised and managed had resulted in a new structural configuration – projects (Lundin & Steinhórsson 2003). Changing organisational forms across industries occasioned an increasing use of project teams to deliver services and products. Working within these temporary organisational forms can present additional challenges for individuals in pursuing their careers and require “attention to careers by management” (Inkson & King, 2011: 50). Career models for project managers are still under development (Hölzle, 2010; Bredin & Söderlund, 2013). Organisations that use business projects, development projects, and change project could be expected to view “project competence as critical for the company's success” (Bredin & Soderlund 2013: 892). Yet specific theories of career, and of career and employee development are not yet available.

### **Careers in Temporary Organisations**

Traditional career theory views a career as within the hierarchy of roles in an organisation through which those entering progress by moving from one related job to another in a sequence decided by the organisation's structure (McDonald, Brown & Bradley 2005). They assume stability that enables

stages of career to be predicted as if secure jobs still dominated within traditional organisational structures (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte & Guichard 2009). These approaches dominated in the past because organisational structures supported them (Sullivan 1999). The flattening of organisational structures, increased use of teams as a result of the quality movement and projectification have led to new and different career types. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, economic and technological change as a result of globalisation had led to new models of career with protean and boundaryless career models (Briscoe & Hall 2006) indicating that shorter employment spans, contract work and changes in career direction were being acknowledged. The use of the word 'protean' to describe an approach to career indicates flexibility and adaptability (Inkson 2006). Those exhibiting this approach to career are said to be driven by their internal values which guide their career actions and choices and to be self directed in managing their careers (Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram & Henderickx 2008) rather than have these choices directed by, or strongly influenced by, their employer. Careers have been described as 'boundaryless' to indicate that limits or restrictions no longer exist (Inkson 2006). Those pursuing a boundaryless career are willing to move within and between organisations, and change their geographic location, in order to achieve their career goals (Segers, et al. 2008). These new career models sent a strong message that employees were now expected to accept considerable responsibility for their own careers. Sullivan (1999) claimed that new career systems that would better suit the new organisational forms were required. If organisations were required to be more flexible and adaptable, it seemed that their employees were likewise expected to exhibit flexibility and adaptability to work within the new structures.

### **Career Development Within New Organisational Forms**

Lindkvist (2004) described an R&D organisation that became a project-based organisation and which realised that project team members experienced conflict in addressing both the demands of the functional area to which they were appointed and the goals of the projects to which they were assigned. Hence, as organisations structure their operations differently to compete in today's competitive environment, reporting relationships and traditional structures come into question. When an individual becomes unclear about where they belong within an organisation, whether they report to the head of

the functional area into which they were originally appointed or their project leader, where they might go to obtain support for development may also become unclear.

Analysing careers through the constructivist lens, Bassot (2012:12) stated that “Constructivism as a paradigm posits that learning is an active process, where the learner builds his or her knowledge in an on-going way”. Being provided with the opportunity to take on new and challenging project roles can help to build an individual’s career. Selection of staff to project teams and roles within them is not always well coordinated making building the knowledge, skills and experience to progress a career in PM problematic. Baruch (2004) suggested that careers were no longer linear but rather multi-directional. Bloch (2005) used nonlinear dynamics, chaos and complexity theories in an effort to develop a theory of career development for the today’s workplace. The theory of career development that Bloch attempted to develop would explain how careers unfold today, one that considered the nature of the workplace and the extent to which they adapt to new and different ways of conducting their activities.

From a career development perspective, Amundson (2006) acknowledged that the somewhat chaotic environment in which people now work, as described by Bloch (2005), creates a challenge for career counselling professionals. There now was a need to adopt a life long approach to career guidance and to consider alternative ways of delivering this support. Amundson (2006:4) cited an increasing “reliance on temporary or contract positions”, people needing to consider self-employment as a career option, the emphasis on interpersonal skills in today’s team-based workplace, and greater diversity in the workplace as some of the issues impacting on careers as a result of today’s chaotic work environment. New and appropriate models of career development are required (Edum-Fotwe & McCaffer, 2000; Madter, Bower & Aritua, 2012). Ensuring a knowledgeable and highly skilled PM workforce into the future will require that the competency development of the increasing number of PM contractors is addressed (De Vos, De Hauw & Van der Heijden, 2011).

## **Research Design**



A qualitative research design was adopted for this research, using semi-structured interview format to conduct in-depth interviews to gain insight in to the way in which project staff were developed. Seventy three interviews were conducted across the four industry sectors. A distinction was drawn between Engineering and Building Construction because of differences in the culture and practices of heavy engineering and building construction companies in Australia. Information technology was combined with business as for those involved in projects in the business sector there is often a nexus between the two.

Our topic allowed us to explore the broad issues of career development and planning in Australian PM organisations through a descriptive research design (de Vaus, 2002). We involved project managers from a range of industries including construction, engineering, emergency management and information technology/business. Our study consisted of in depth interviews with project managers. In depth interviews are relatively unstructured, extensive interviews often used in the primary stages of the research process. In depth interviews differ from traditional interviews in that they encourage discussion on an undisguised subject area without influencing the direction of that discussion except through probe questions intended to encourage further elaboration (Zikmund, 2003). Face to face interviews were conducted at a location determined by the interviewees or by telephone. The semi-structured format for the in depth interviews was developed through a literature search and interviews were conducted by each of the writers involved in this project with each interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participation was voluntary and responses were treated as anonymous and results confidential. A snowball approach to sampling was used. Data were analysed and coded using the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti (Friese, 2012).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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To provide a basis for identification of potential generational differences in career paths and expectations, in Table 2, the interviewees have also been categorised according to age group (generation).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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## Research Findings

The objective of this study was to investigate the career journey of project managers in Australia to gain an understanding of the path their careers have taken. With the increasing demand for PM professionals, training, development and challenging work experience opportunities will be required to prepare the project managers of the future. Thus the aim of our research was to attempt to answer the question: Do organisations offer learning opportunities that support career development for project managers?

Results are provided for just three of the sub questions asked of participants in this research. These questions relate to the level of support that project managers receive from their employers to develop their PM and other knowledge and skills and to progress their careers and intentions to remain in the PM profession.

- *Have you had a mentor and, if so, did having a mentor assist you in your career?*
- *Is your career and competence development supported by your organisation? And, do all employees, including women, have equal access to training and special assignments?*
- *Do you intend to remain in project management?*

### *Mentoring of Project Managers*

Of the 41 participants who discussed mentoring, 35 indicated they had had or still had a mentor, two indicated that they were mentors, and two males and two females indicated they did not have and had not had in the past a mentor. Of those who had been mentored, ten described this as an informal relationship. The relationship with a supportive supervisor or project leader often developed into mentoring, where career advice and support was provided, for instance.

However another participant highlighted the limitations that temporary project roles may place on developing an on going mentoring relationship:

I think there's more emphasis on the short term because you're constantly forming teams, and then pulling them apart, and then reforming them somewhere else. There's more emphasis on the short term mentoring than there is on longer term career. (Male Construction)

A male who had never had a mentor indicated they would have liked a mentor at times throughout their career. Younger project managers were more likely to have had a mentor than were older project managers, indicating that mentoring is more common now as a means of developing project managers. No one indicated a negative mentoring experience.

Often it was within the mentoring relationship, or when being supervised by a supportive manager, that participants received on-going career advice and were counselled on human resource (HR) development opportunities:

... my manager from a couple of roles ago I had a good working relationship with but I've also subsequently had good advice from him which has been quite beneficial and he's put me in contact with people at other organisation just to get ideas about career development. (Male Construction)

### ***Equitable support for development and special assignments***

There was considerable variation in the responses to the question seeking information on the level of career and competence development support received from the organisation.

Yes. We have a good protocol of managing career development which dovetails with performance review appraisals. ... You provide your input and what your aspirations are, what training courses you would like to do, and vice versa, if they feel there are deficiencies in your performance then they make recommendations. (Male/IT Business)

For some, the level of support received depended on their supervisor's willingness to assist.

I have been very, very, very lucky to be working under [supervisor] because she is very pro-development and ... very supportive of my career aspirations ... She identifies opportunities for me ... my line manager has given me all the development opportunities

I have required and more ... and ... exposed me to ... people outside the organisation who could provide hands-on experience. ... I feel that the organisation however is not as ... um (Female Emergency Management)

An ability to seek out development opportunities combined with a good relationship with supervisors provided greater access to development opportunities:

Pretty much me doing it for myself, I tended to have really strong relationships with my managers. (Female IT/Business)

Lack of structure or formalisation of development across the organisation led to the feeling that opportunities were not equitably allocated, rather it came down to who your supervisor was:

I don't think it's particularly well structured, so I think they could do better at being more proactive. Often it depends on your boss and so some people seem well supported and given lots of opportunities and ... things suggested ... to them, and other bosses you really have to find the opportunities yourself and go to them and say "I want to do this and I want to ... " (Female Emergency Management)

Support from the organisation was not always easy to gain:

I did have to fight for it and I just said that 'I need...' I argue strongly that it's for the benefit of [organisation] if they keep my skills current. (Female Emergency Management)

A protean approach to career was demonstrated by the response from one male engineer when asked if their organisation supported career and competence development. He believed that the responsibility lay with the individual and that the support from the organisation was limited:

They do to a certain extent. At the end of the day I believe everything falls on your own shoulders though and its up to the individual to make a move and ask for development and career progression. They do offer small things like development of soft skills, management skills. So there is some support to a certain extent. (Male/Engineering)

One male participant commented that they had not had a mentor and indicated that they had taken a protean career approach, having taken responsibility for their own development rather than rely on the organisation:

... with long term career planning, I've pieced together my career by working in a number of organisations picking up different experiences and reflecting on them and building my tool sets and capabilities as I go and usually you're working forward and sometimes you take time to reflect. (Male IT/Business)

A female participant had also taken on board responsibility for progressing her own career:

My career has very much been guided by me going "I've had enough of this now, I'm just going to go and look at something else", and I find some very different roles at one time or another. (Female Construction)

With regard to the question of equal access to opportunities of training or special assignment within projects there was a resounding 'yes' to equal access across all areas and genders except women in construction and in the non-operation area of emergency management, who explained that access to training for women was not equitable.

Yes, it's just whether they take them or not. (Male Business/IT).

Yes and no. They are supporting me with the doctorate but to varying levels ... . There is that letter to say, 'Yes we approve your study,' ... But, I am finding that I'm having trouble getting allocated study time ... but I'm also aware that there are operational members\* who are also doing research, who are absolutely getting that eight hours a week. (Female Emergency Management) \*[commonly male]

A female from Business/IT commented that because development opportunities were broadcast to relevant staff access was equal but a female in Construction felt that some staff did not receive basic training to support licencing and another female in the construction industry felt that although the organisation stated development was available, in practice this did not occur.

One group in particular was identified as being unequally treated when it came to development:

I'm on fixed term contract. I think it's more people who are in full time employment, continuous employment, are more likely to get it than people on fixed term. And the trouble is within the [organisation], people stay on fixed term for a long, long time, so there's people here that have been on fixed term for ten years and it just rolls from one to the next. (Female Emergency Management).

As with career planning and development advice, it was within some mentoring relationships that participants were provided with the opportunity to demonstrate their ability by taking on special assignments or higher level duties where they provided the opportunity to demonstrate their potential.

A male Boomer reflected on the impact of these experiences on his career:

I have been fortunate enough to work with a number of senior people who have taken me under their wing and mentored me in the process. I have certainly cherished and benefitted from the experience. One particular portfolio manager at BANK invariably used to put me in charge of running the development unit on his behalf while he was running other ... activities and special projects. (Male IT/Business)

### ***Continuing to Pursue a Career in Project Management***

Largely it was the challenge that PM provided and the ability to look back on a completed project, and learn from the experience that led to the majority of participants indicating an intention to remain in PM.

Yes, but ... probably continue to pick and choose my projects ... I like a challenge. (Male Construction)

There was, however, an acceptance that the current role may not continue.

I am on a mammoth learning curve; if I wasn't learning anymore I would perhaps move on or get it from elsewhere. I believe I add a lot of value to the business and to people and that's what I really enjoy. But who really knows what's going to happen around the corner. (Female Engineer)

Several participants stated they had ‘fallen into’ PM. The jobs they were doing had been redesigned so it could be carried out using a PM approach. One participant had grown to enjoy project management and did not wish to return to on-going role:

I like project management, I find it interesting and ... that most of what I do feels like project management even if it's not an actual project ... so whether we call it a ‘project’ or not, it sort of feels like that anyway. I would quite like more ... experience and more knowledge about project management ... I've still got a lot to learn. ...the idea of an on-going job is it doesn't appeal so much. (Female Emergency Management)

## **Conclusion**

Mentoring and work roles that provided an opportunity to demonstrate abilities and learn new skills were considered most helpful for career development. Training in specific PM skills was the most commonly provided support. Contractors did not receive the same assistance as those in on-going employment. Overall there is no single approach taken to career and competence development, including the use of mentors, across the industries. Support for career development, whether in the form of formal learning programs, challenging assignments or mentoring, depended on the attitude and leadership style of the immediate supervisor. As a result, at the moment there can be considerable inequity in relation to the amount and quality of career development and overall management and leadership training provided to project managers, despite the fact that their contribution to the organisation has been identified as vital (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013). Project-based organising continues to challenge the HR function within organisations. This may be because to this point no specific theory of career for project managers or theory of career development for them has been developed. There is increasing interest in and support for suitable models (Edum-Fotwe & McCaffer, 2000; Madter, Bower & Aritua, 2012) but these have tended to be industry sector specific rather than PM profession wide. The issue of contractors and their competency development for future employability is an area that requires further research (De Vos, De Hauw & Van der Heijden, 2011).

Project teams support the way organisations are now organised and managed (Lundin & Steinthórsson

2003) and it is recognised that working within these new organisational forms may present individuals with challenges in pursuing their careers and that this may require management attention (Inkson & King, 2011: 50). Career models for project managers are still being developed (Hölzle, 2010; Bredin & Söderlund, 2013), with current models providing only limited insight into the career paths of project managers (Keegan & Turner, 2003; Huemann et. al., 2004; Hölzle, 2010); they do not describe the learning experiences that drive the development of project managers. Organisations' success now depends on business, development, and change project success (Bredin & Soderlund 2013) yet the recognition that project competence is critical for the company's success is not demonstrated through specific theories of career, career development and employee development in PM. Models for use in temporary organisations are required and HR management (HRM) will be expected to develop and administer these. As with HRM models in general, theories of career and of career development have been established to address the needs of traditional organisational structures and in a changing work environment it has been suggested that some reframing of HRM may better meet the needs of project based organisations and the people in them (Turner, Keegan & Huemann. 2007; Bredin 2008). There has been some recognition of the need to develop career paths specifically for project managers (Hölzle, 2010; Bredin & Söderlund, 2013), however there is a need to expand current theories of career and career development as they relate to PM roles.



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Table 1: Research participants by industry and gender

	Construction	Engineering	Business / IT	Emergency Management	Total	%
Male	6	15	21	0	42	58%
Female	5	5	8	13	31	42%
Total	11	20	29	13	73	100%

Table 2: Research participants by generation and gender

	Male	Female	Total	%
Gen Y	3	5	8	11%
Xers	22	16	38	52%
Boomers	17	10	27	37%
Total	42	31	73	100%